

CHICAGO
DAILY NEWS

MAR 2 1964

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Defense Aides Deaf to Hilsman Plea

As one of his last acts before resigning, Roger Hilsman, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, urgently recommended that American troops be stationed in Thailand close to the Laotian border.

His intention according to Pentagon sources was to stiffen badly sagging morale throughout Southeast Asia but most especially in South Viet Nam, Thailand and Laos.

It is in Laos that the situation has deteriorated the most with the Communist Viet Minh troops — not native Pathet Lao but troops directed and armed by Hanoi — having driven this month to within 15 miles of the Laotian-Thailand border.

And the strange administration silence on this new and dangerous aggression in Laos has been inexplicable in light of the fact that the Communists almost always take silence as acquiescence. History has repeatedly shown that if the free world fails to make a public fuss over Communist aggressive acts the Communists assume—sometimes alas rightly—that the free world doesn't really care.

So the movement of troops in Thailand would have a psychological as well as strategic purpose — to show that the United States was not indifferent to the most recent Communist grabs.

SO FAR, Hilsman's recommendations, again by the Pentagon's own admission, have

been blocked by high Defense Department officials. This dismays many high-ranking soldiers in the Pentagon familiar with the crisis of morale in Southeast Asia who agree with Hilsman that something must be done. Indeed, according to White House sources, it is not even sure that President Johnson has been deeply briefed on the urgency — at the very least — of some public warning to Hanoi about their drive to Thailand's border.

And this is a typical example of how the recommendations of the official responsible for the area are sidetracked, illustrating the frustrations of being held publicly accountable to the United States for events in Southeast Asia even though authority for directing these events is very limited.

In short, the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs is often bum rapped for policies over which he has the most marginal control.

THE FULL story may be long delayed in the telling, but there is no doubt, for instance, that Henry Cabot Lodge, ambassador to Viet Nam, has been quite a cross not only for Hilsman but also for the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, whose principal representative in Viet Nam, Gen. Paul Harkins, has been the object of Lodge-inspired press attacks.

Additionally, John McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has suffered casualties. His principal representative in Viet Nam, John Richardson, was recalled last fall also as the result of Lodge-inspired press attacks.

Lodge went to Viet Nam without any real knowledge of the problems of modern day Viet Nam and his free-wheeling ways proved troublesome to handle. For instance several times prior to the Nov. 1 coup d'état, Lodge was instructed by the Department of Defense to keep in close communication with President Diem and he replied in effect: "My policy is not to go to Diem — but to let Diem come to me."

ACCORDING to a high administration source, Hilsman made enemies and trouble for himself mainly as a result of his controversial — and perhaps exaggerated — role in inspiring the Nov. 1 coup and his subsequent attempts to rationalize it.

As this source put it: "Hilsman came a cropper because he tried to rewrite history to exonerate his coup d'état, but in the process took a stand that was in contradiction to the available evidence.

"Hilsman tried to argue that the shock and chaos of the coup d'état (including the wholesale purge of every major official) was not responsible for the downturn in the

war but that the war had been going badly all along.

"Certainly Diem and Nhu colored some things their way. But these lies were marginal vis a vis the whole picture. If the we-are-losing-all-the-time theory was right, then Diem and Nhu played thousands of Americans for fools, not only Gen. Harkins, but Sec. McNamara, Gen. Taylor and a lot of competent foreign observers including Robert Thompson of the British advisory mission.

"None of these persons are prepared to accept the role of fools — or the contention that the war has been going badly all along. To this day, it is the conviction of those who have passed any time at the fronts in Viet Nam that the war was beginning to be won last summer and was set back first by the political warfare waged by Washington against Diem last fall and the chaos brought by the November coup.

"In arguing that the war never went well, Hilsman played right into the hands of those who say 'what's the use, you can't win.'

"This argument is in contradiction to the facts. It is bad for American morale, bad for Vietnamese morale, and useful only to the defeatists. Hilsman asked to resign. But his attempt to rewrite history created the kind of irritation that made many glad to see him go."

The underlined passage was omitted from the WASHINGTON STAR of February 28.

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